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Child Welfare and Behavioral Health Professionals Working Together to Ensure Open Communication, Support and Positive Outcomes for Children and Families

Behavioral Health (Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Treatment) professionals are key to ensuring parents/caregivers that are involved with the child welfare system receive the treatment they need to keep their families intact and/or to reunify. When child welfare staff and behavioral health professionals communicate and collaborate, children and families receive the support necessary to secure the services to promote safety, permanency, and well-being. This guidance memo provides information regarding effective collaboration between child welfare staff and behavioral health professionals, including some of the benefits, barriers, and solutions that will assist parents who are involved in the child welfare system.

What are the benefits to working together as part of the system of care for a family?

- Families, child welfare staff, and behavioral health providers will have clear expectations as to what needs to change for a child to remain in the home or to be reunified with the parent/caregiver.
- The parent/caregiver understands that their treatment plan will come with expectations to change patterns of behaviors that have led their child(ren) to be in unsafe situations.
- Progress in the treatment plan will be measured and timely.
- Information sharing between child welfare staff and behavioral health professionals will be open, collaborative, and responsive.

What are some of the barriers that can impact behavioral health providers and child welfare staff working together?

- Miscommunication and misunderstanding between the behavioral health provider and child welfare staff can occur.
- A treatment plan may be developed that does not focus on the behavioral changes necessary to ensure the parent can provide safety for their child.
- Treatment may focus only on the parent and not take into consideration the child and others impacted by the trauma and abuse and/or neglect that has occurred within the family unit.
- Misunderstandings may occur regarding confidentiality and what can and cannot be shared between child welfare staff and behavioral health professionals.
- Behavioral health professionals may have concerns regarding testifying in child welfare court proceedings, including ethical and boundary issues, and the amount of time that will be necessary to prepare and testify.

What can behavioral health providers do while working with families involved with child welfare?

- Work with the parent/caregiver to recognize the importance of a free flow of information. Secure necessary releases of information as a prerequisite to treatment which is provided through informed consent. This should include the limits of confidentiality and privilege, communication with other parties, and the potential to testify in a court proceeding. This discussion should be updated as the situation changes or requires.
- Meet with child welfare staff that are working with the parent/caregiver.
- Strive to understand the reason why child welfare is involved and gather this information from those involved including the caseworker, parent, child, and other family members.
- Recognize that for families involved with child welfare it is necessary for the family to be considered as a whole unit and discussed during treatment. Have conversations regarding the abuse and/or neglect the child experienced and how the child was impacted. Assist the parent with understanding their role in what happened to their child while using techniques that maximize therapeutic engagement.
- Make themselves aware of evidence-based treatment modalities and use those treatments to fidelity.
- Develop treatment plans in collaboration with the parent/caregiver that meet the expectations of the parent's/caregiver's Child Welfare Family Plan/Rehabilitation and Reunification Plan.
- Provide progress notes to child welfare staff every 90 days, or more frequently, if needed, that specify what progress has been made, how it relates to the Family Plan/Rehabilitation and Reunification plan, and how the parent/caregiver has demonstrated behavioral change as outlined in the treatment plan.
- Participate in family team meetings, whether in person, on the phone, virtually, or via written correspondence that provides the family team participants with an update.

What can behavioral health providers expect from child welfare staff?

- Referral for services will include information about the parents/caregivers and their children, as well as why the family is involved with the child welfare system.
- Releases that have been signed by the parents and child welfare staff that will allow sharing of information to build a transparent partnership to support the success of the family.
- Contact information from the child welfare caseworker that will include the name of the caseworker, name of the caseworker's supervisor, phone number, business address, email, and fax number.
- Messages returned in a timely manner.
- Plans that have been developed by the family and their team in collaboration with the child welfare caseworker will be shared with the treatment provider.
- Ongoing communication by the child welfare caseworker to share information, concerns, and updates regarding a family's progress to inform initial decision-making and periodic re-assessment of the family's functioning.

- The behavioral health provider will be invited to participate in family team meetings and will be given the opportunity to attend in person, by phone, or virtually.

The hope is that with collaboration between Child Welfare and Behavioral Health Providers:

- Parents/caregivers will receive treatment that focuses on the family as a whole unit.
- Parents/caregivers will have clear and realistic expectations in their treatment goals.
- Parents/caregivers, child welfare staff and behavioral health providers will work together effectively via open communication, essential collaboration, and work as a team to ensure success for the families served.

In the next several months, the Office of Child and Family Services will continue to work in partnership with behavioral health providers to build a collaborative approach to supporting families. These efforts will engage providers and staff in discussions on this topic. Meetings, webinars, and trainings will focus on the child welfare system, the need for behavioral health services for parents involved in the child welfare system, and how the staff and providers can work together to ensure parents/caregivers receive the support they need to address the abuse and neglect that has occurred within their family system.

Maine statute regarding confidential and privileged communication:

<https://legislature.maine.gov/statutes/22/title22sec4015.html>